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ABSTRACT

A fundamental issue in research on violence between couples who are dating or married is the question of when abuse begins in the relationship. A study was conducted to examine the relationship between gender, level of emotional commitment, and the use of conflict tactics in couples whose levels of emotional commitment ranged from "casual dating" to "married." College students (N=562) who reported being involved in a dating or married relationship responded to a modified form of the Conflict Tactics Scale. Three subscales were used: reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence. The results demonstrated that level of emotional commitment was a major factor which influenced conflict tactics. While the relationship between gender and level of emotional commitment was complex, the general pattern was that the greater the level of emotional commitment, the greater the reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence scores. Clear gender specific patterns in the use of conflict tactics across the eight levels of commitment emerged. (Author/NB)

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Gender Differences in the use of Conflict Tactics Across Eight Levels of Emotional Commitment

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Abstract

Five hundred sixty-two respondents were utilized to investigate the relationship between gender, level of emotional commitment and the use of conflict tactics. The eight levels of emotional commitment used in this study ranged from "casual Dating" to "married." The results demonstrate that level of emotional commitment is a major factor which influences conflict tactics. While the relationship between gender and level of emotional commitment is complex, it follows the general pattern of the greater the level of emotional commitment, the greater the Reasoning, Verbal Aggression and Violence scores. However, clear gender specific patterns in the use of conflict tactics across the eight levels of commitment emerged.

Introduction

Ever since Makepeace's (1981) article presented evidence that a substantial minority of couples experience violence in their dating relationships there have been multiple articles which have confirmed this phenomenon. (Bernard, Bernard, & Bernard), 1985; Brodbelt, 1983; Makepeace, 1981, 1983; Sack, Keller, & Howard, 1982).

One of the fundamental issues which has only tentatively been investigated deals with the question of when the abuse begins in the relationship. Most researchers (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Laner, 1983; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985) have found data consistent with Laner and Thompson's (1982) statement that "regardless of the kind(s) of conflict tactic used, relationships defined as serious and meaningful show higher rates of abuse and aggression than those defined as casual" (p. 235). However, Billingham (1985) and Billingham and Sack (in press) found almost no difference in the prevalence of violence across seven levels of emotional commitment when respondents were asked to complete Straus' (1979) Conflicts Tactics Scale in terms of their current relationshp.

The purpose of the present paper is to expand on Billingham (1985) and Billingham and Sack's (in press) work by expanding the levels of emotional commitment to include married respondents and to investigate the role that gender may play in the use of conflict tactics across the levels of emotional commitment. In keeping with the authors' belief that violence should be viewed as an attempt at conflict resolution, the present study includes the date on all three of Straus' (1979) CTS subscales.

Method

Respondents.

Questionnaires were distributed to 880 students enrolled in classes thought to have the broadest cross representation of academic majors. These classes were: Human Sexuality, Marriage and Family Interaction, Life Span Human Development, and Adolescent Development. Of the 880 questionnaires distributed, 747 (85%) were completed and returned. The high return rate was possibly due to the fact that the students were informed of the nature of the survey, i.e. to help understand how couples resolve conflicts. In addition, the basic frequency distribution information was made available to the courses' instructors for possible discussion. Twenty-seven individuals who responded that their ethnic origin was other than Black or Caucasion were excluded. Therefore, the number of usable subjects was 720. Of these 158 reported that they were not currently involved in a dating or married relationship. This left a total of 562 (184 males and 378 females) who were included in the analysis.

From the targeted courses, 74 unique majors were identified. The ages of the students ranged from 18 (N = 17) to 72 (N = 1) with the median age being 20.8.

Instrument.

A modified form of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), Form A, (Straus, 1979) was utilized to measure conflict resolution strategies. In its original form, the CTS was concerned with how spouses acted during conflicts or disagreements. In the present study the wording was changed so that non-married individuals could respond to the statements based on: 1) how they responded during conflicts and 2) how their partners responded during conflicts. Subjects were asked to respond to each of the 14 items using a scale which ranged from 0 (never) to 5 (more than once a month).

The present study used the three subscales for a more complete picture of conflict resolution. The Reasoning subscale was obtained by summing items 1 through 4, the Verbal Aggression subscale by summing items 5 through 9, and the Violence subscale by summing items 10 through 14. The ranges of scores for the subscales are: Reasoning, 0 to 20; Verbal Aggression, 0 to 25; and Violence, 0 to 25.

Level of Emotional Commitment was based on the student's responses to a seven level scale. These levels were:

Level 1: casual dating, little emotional attachment.

Level 2: Someone you have dated often, but to whom you are not emotionally attached.

Level 3: Someone to whom you are emotionally attached, but you are not in love.

Level 4: Someone with whom you are in love.

Level 5: Someone with whom you are in love and would like to marry, but have never discussed marriage with them.

Level 6: Someone with whom you are in love and have discussed marriage, but have made no plans.

Level 7: Someone with whom you are engaged to marry.

Results

Sex.

The results of the present analysis demonstrate that sex produced a significant difference only for the Verbal Aggression score. The results are as follows:

Verbal Aggression, $F(1,8) = 8.434$, $p < .004$.

The difference found in the Verbal Aggression score was due to females ($\bar{X} = 7.04$) having a higher score than the males ($\bar{X} = 5.64$).

Level of Emotional Commitment.

The results of the present analysis demonstrate that level of emotional commitment produced significant differences for the Reasoning, Verbal Aggression and Violence scores. The results are as follows:

Reasoning, $F(1,8) = 8.088$, $p < .001$

Verbal Aggression, $F(1,8) = 5.219$, $p < .001$

Violence, $F(1,8) = 2.606 = p < .012$

The difference found in the Reasoning scores was due to level 1 ($\bar{X} = 6.66$) respondents having lower scores than did the level 5 ($\bar{X} = 11.15$), level 6 ($\bar{X} = 10.44$), level 7 ($\bar{X} = 10.45$) and level 8 ($\bar{X} = 10.79$) respondents.

The difference found in the Verbal Aggression score was due to level 1 ($\bar{X} = 4.46$) respondents having lower scores than did the level 6 ($\bar{X} = 7.59$) or level 8 ($\bar{X} = 9.38$) respondents.

The difference found in the Violence score was due to level 1 ($\bar{X} = 0.62$) respondents having lower scores than did the level 8 ($\bar{X} = 2.72$) respondents.

Interaction.

While there was no significant interactive effect found, the pattern of scores for the sexes across the levels of commitment suggest that curvalinear relationships between gender and level of emotional commitment may exist (See Figure 1). Further research on this question is clearly needed.

Discussion

These results suggest that level of emotional commitment may be a key variable in understanding courtship violence. In fact, level of commitment produced significant differences for all of the conflict tactic subscores.

There are two major points which bear discussion. First, as is noted in the Figure provided, violence exists at all levels of emotional commitment. However, the incidence of violent acts is greatest among the married group. While this may be regarded as support for the observation that the marriage license may be a hitting license, it may be a more accurate observation that married people are forced to interact with each other over time and have more conflicts with less opportunity to escape. Second, males report lower incidents of violence at the moderate levels of commitment and equal or greater incidents at the lower and higher levels of commitment. This suggests that level of emotional commitment has a differential influence on males and females use of violence in a dating context. This is an observation worthy of additional research.

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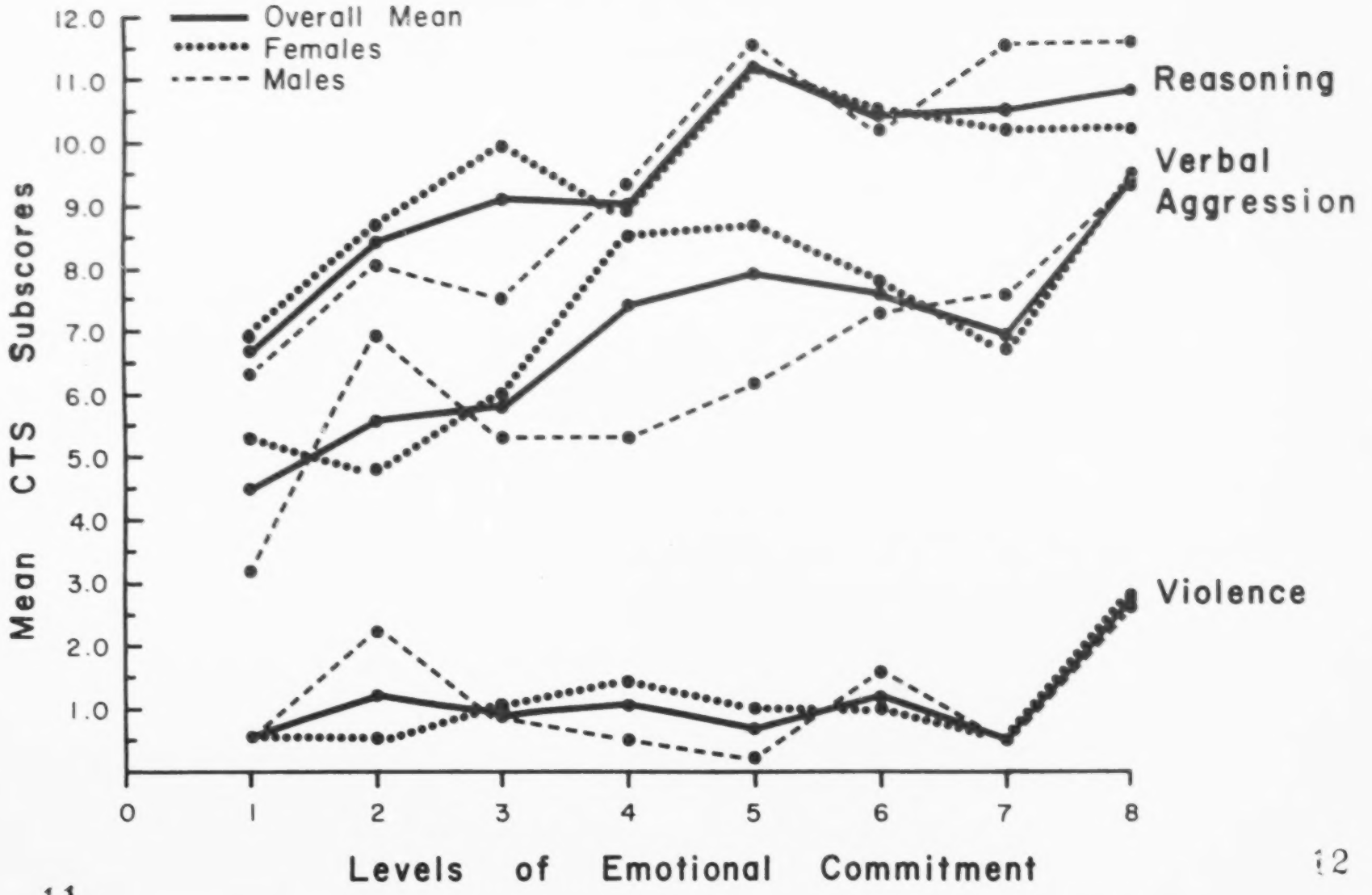
Overall Mean
Females
Males
Reasoning
Verbal Aggression
Violence
Mean CTS Subscores
12.0
11.0
10.0
9.0
8.0
7.0
6.0
5.0
4.0
3.0
2.0
1.0
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
Levels of Emotional Commitment